Complete photography guide

Digital Camera magazine

Master Composition

CREATE YOUR BEST-EVER PHOTOS USING OUR EXPERT TECHNIQUES

- How to frame different subjects
- Tricks to give your photos real depth
- Know the rules – and when to break them

VITAL SKILLS GUIDE 1

Digital Camera magazine



Master Composition

If there's one element that can radically improve your photographs, one feature that can lift your picture from snapshot to art, it's a sense of composition. Today's cameras and image processing software provide impressive control over exposure and colour balance, but your photos'll never succeed if the contents don't gel together. We'll show you how to get it right.



Master Composition

CREATE YOUR BEST-EVER PHOTOS USING OUR EXPERT TECHNIQUES

Digital Camera magazine



Media with passion



Contents

Make your photos sing...

Just as a composer has to arrange a piece of music, deciding which instruments will work together, which sounds flow and which clash, so it is that a photographer has to construct powerful images from the visual overload hitting them from all directions. To picture a scene through a photographer's eyes is very different to just looking at it for what it is.

This book is designed to guide you through the process of refining your vision, learning what makes a strong composition, the visual tricks you can play to get your message across in a single frame, and the pitfalls to avoid. We'll cover patterns, movement, finding a focal point and creating depth.

We've also pulled together some great examples of the work of master photographers as well as some fresh images that highlight composition rules and techniques we think will make a difference to your own photographs.

Secretly, we've probably all got a little bit of a rule-breaker locked away in us – or at least we'd like to think we have. Hopefully, this book will give you an insight into the compositional 'laws' that help get the components of your pictures in order, then give you the confidence to try breaking one or two of them. We hope you have fun doing just that – and we can't wait to see your results...

Marcus Hawkins
Editor, Digital Camera Magazine






TEAM LING - LIVE, INFORMATIVE, NON-COST AND GENUINE !

Lines & shapes

You need to train your eye to look for lines and shapes within a scene. They're the building blocks of your photograph. Each can be used to enhance your image to ensure your message gets across effectively. Horizontal lines, for instance, are restful – think of a person asleep or the distant horizon. Vertical lines, such as trees or skyscrapers offer more dynamism, particularly when the shot is taken in portrait format to emphasise their height. The most powerful of all though is the diagonal. This is the line that cuts across your view and leads you into the picture. It can be used to create a sense of depth and movement, and brings the flat plane of a photograph to life.





Horizontal lines

As highlighted, these are the most 'relaxing' of lines, bringing a peace to your photographs. In fact, run the horizon directly through the centre of your frame, with an equal amount of sky and landscape on each side, and you're on the way to a dull photograph! Naturally, this isn't always the case. But it's good practice to think about which element of your scene is more impressive and move the horizon higher or lower to emphasise it.

You can take this to extremes. To really bring out a stunning sunset, full of rim-lit, interesting clouds, find a subject that'll make a striking silhouette, then render it small at the bottom of your frame. Layers of horizontal lines can provide a rhythm to your picture – think of a wave breaking on the shore, more waves coming into view and the horizon in the background. This 'rhythm' of lines can become the subject itself.

Vertical lines

Strong, dynamic lines. Combine horizontal lines with these to create more powerful results. When we think of vertical lines, we think of trees, buildings and people. If you want to emphasise their height and power, try switching to a vertical format for your photograph – you can then increase their size, while their strength will be mirrored by the longest sides of the frame.

Conversely, you can make vertical lines seem as if they're bursting out of the picture if you opt for landscape format, running the top and bottom ends of the line out of the frame.

Thankfully, the digital advantage means we can correct converging verticals with ease in post-production, further strengthening the power of the vertical line.



Square format shots tend to be less dynamic than rectangular ones, lending themselves to 'quiet' landscapes. Here, the soft colours, high horizon and small focal point create an image that's simple and serene.

Diagonal lines

The most interesting and visually exciting lines. They can lead you into the frame to the centre of interest by the most dynamic of routes. As viewers we tend to take more notice of subjects cutting through our vision.

Avoid splitting the frame directly in two by running a diagonal line from one corner to the other – the picture tends to lose its drive. It's more interesting to have a diagonal start just to one side of a corner and continue through the frame to the other side of the opposite corner. You'll have a more balanced image that works within the confines of the frame.



Shapes

The most active of shapes use diagonal lines – the triangle is an eye-catching building block for your picture. Its three sides also introduce odd numbers into the photographic vocabulary. As well as triangular shaped subjects, think about the structure of your photograph – are there three elements you could join together with imaginary lines to form a triangle?

Four-sided shapes such as squares and rectangles mirror the four sides of the picture frame – there's no conflict there, so the viewing experience isn't as absorbing. However, they can be used alongside diagonals and triangles to produce a more exciting image.

Combining circles or curved lines with straight ones produces great tension.

Here, the diagonal leads us from the focal point – the nearest windmill – into the picture to take in the others. The flat lighting means the photograph needs a strong graphic element.

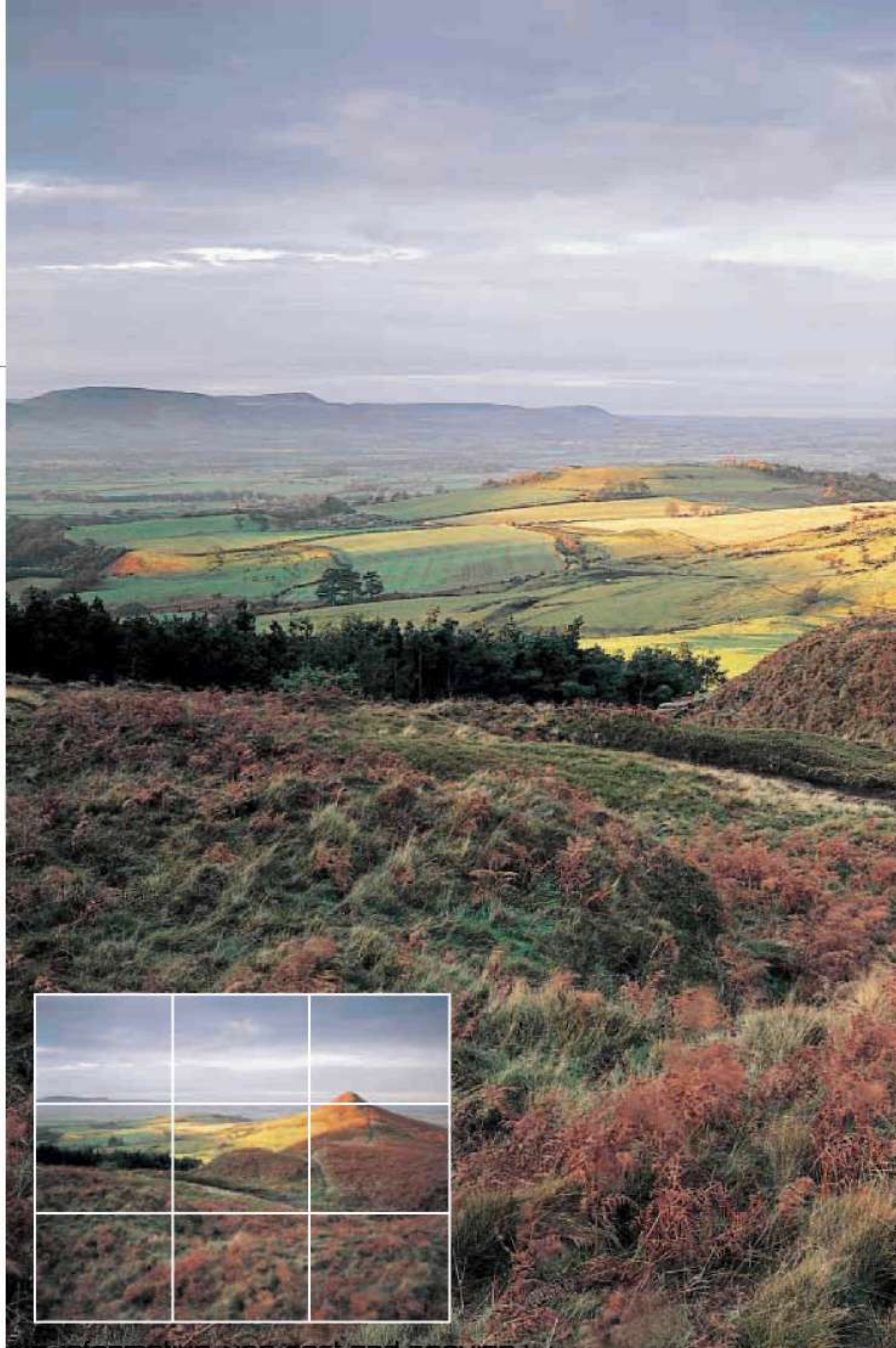
The vertical lines of the pillars meeting the curved shape above creates an image with power. Notice how the curved line doesn't start or end right in the corners – the photo isn't split in half.





The rule of thirds

While there are times when you need to place your subject in the centre of the frame, you can create more interesting, balanced and powerful compositions by placing the subject off-centre in your photograph. This immediately cause the viewer's eye to move around the image – centrally placed subjects tend to focus attention in the middle of the image and leave it there, making pictures feel flat as a result. If you're trying to create an abstract or graphic representation of reality, this might be exactly the technique you're looking for. However, you can strengthen your compositions with a subtle shift of the focal point.





Placing the peak bathed in sunlight at one of the points of power gives this photograph clarity – we know what we're supposed to be looking at because all the elements lead us there.

Know the rules

One of the most frequently used ways of directing the viewer's eye to the centre of interest in a picture is by following the rule of thirds. You've probably heard Digital Camera Magazine and other photographers talk about this, the most common compositional tool, developed by painters centuries ago. The idea is to imagine your frame is split into nine equal sections by two horizontal lines and two vertical lines. By placing your subject or a key part of your scene at or near a point where the lines cross – a point of power – you'll lead your viewer's eye through the image and create a more balanced composition. You'll be surprised how dominant smaller subjects can become in a much larger scene. There's a similar rule – the Golden Mean – where the proportions are slightly different, although the idea's the same.

Break the rules

Not every image should conform to the rule of thirds – otherwise you'll end up creating a series of similarly paced pictures. Sometimes, all it takes is a slight nudge of the main subject off-centre to create a more balanced picture. Or try moving them right to the edge of the frame.

At other times, you'll just need to place your subject bang in the centre of the photo. As long as that's where you want to hold your viewer's attention, that's perfect. Imagine you're on safari and a lion starts running towards you. This is probably the time to place the subject dead centre, if you managed to hold your camera steady… In practice, this is probably because you'll need your most sensitive autofocus points to track the animal, but it's also perfect placement if the lion's gaze is fixed on you.

Close-ups

The same rules can be applied to any subject – they're not just limited to landscapes and other wide-angle work. Employ the rule of thirds to faces, flowers or other macro images, by moving a key feature to a point of power.

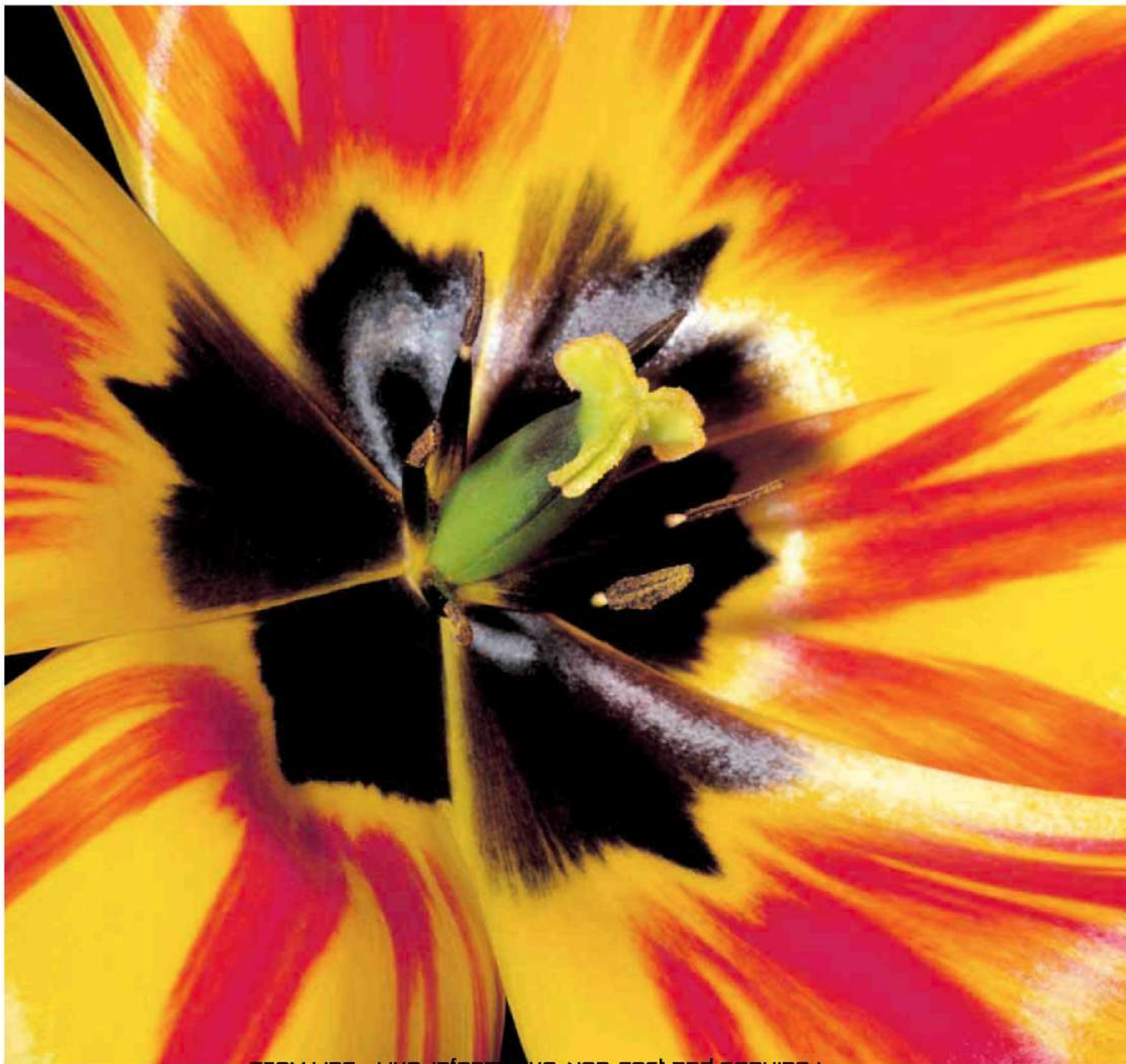
Although this scene is dominated by the foreground rocks, careful placement of the only man-made feature of the scene close to a point of power and waiting for the right light, has delivered a great shot.



Although this image is fairly central, it's been lifted by the figure looming into view from one side of the frame. The interesting shapes and lines on the costume pull your eye up the frame.









Use lines

Learn to see patterns, lighting and lines that'll help take your viewers to the point of power where you've placed your key feature. This will help increase their strength. Diagonal lines help here – particularly where short ones on one side of the subject are combined with long ones on the other side. Lines that lead your eye to a central subject can help to prevent it from feeling static as well. Get up early or stay out late to see how natural light picks out elements of the landscape – a hillside in warm light placed off-centre against a cool shadowy background demands your viewers' attention!



While this image of a flower doesn't fit the rule of thirds precisely, it's still a well balanced image with an off centre subject. The red markings draw your eye into the focal point.

By placing the tube sign off-centre and using the diagonal lines of the escalators to lead our eyes towards and through the focal point, the photographer has emphasised the tunnel location.

Panoramas

The rule of thirds can be applied to any format – square, rectangular or panoramic. As long as you can divide up the image by two horizontal lines and two vertical ones, you'll have points of power.

There's enough foreground interest to ensure the image feels full, but not enough distracting elements to take our attention away from the main subject – the brightest part of the scene…



Here, the light's the subject. By placing it off-centre, we are free to roam around the image – but we always return to the same spot. The top-right point feels the most powerful – it's where we naturally

Focal point

Before you press the shutter release, you need to consider whether you have clearly defined your image's centre of interest.

One of the most frequent problems we see in photographs submitted to Digital Camera Magazine is backgrounds which detract from the power of the main subject. Whether it's distracting bright patches, colours or shapes, or a poor choice of aperture, your picture can come unstuck with intrusive background detail that fights with the subject for attention. It's far better to crop out the problems in-camera rather than relying on altering your image during post production. That way you'll make use of the full resolution of your camera's sensor.



Look at this scene. What grabs your attention? Everything has a similar weight – and the bear's cropped off awkwardly. The diagonal created by the building leads nowhere.



By identifying the strongest focal point and shifting position, the photographer's created a much more striking composition. Giving the bull more space to look into on the right of the frame would strengthen it further.

Keep it simple

Don't be tempted to keep adding ingredients to your photograph – you can end up with an overcooked final image. Ask yourself what is the most important element in front of you – the thing that drew you to the scene and made you put your camera to your eye in the first place – and arrange all the other elements so that they compliment this.

Be aware that you don't always have to make your focal point the biggest thing in the foreground. A smaller centre of interest, when positioned at a point of power, isolated by a shallow depth of field or slow shutter speed to blur movement around it, or lifted from its surroundings by contrasting colours or textures, can really dominate a scene.

Master of composition

Ernst Haas

Born in Austria in 1921, Ernst Haas travelled the world photographing disappearing cultures, landscapes, animals and more before passing away at the age of 65 in New York. He was one of the most influential photographers of his time – and his work still has the power to influence today.

His first photographic essay, 'Homecoming Prisoners of War', shot in his native Vienna, caused him to be invited to join the respected Magnum agency. This meant he could class the likes of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa as his peers.

Famous for his pioneering work with colour photography and the portrayal of movement through slow shutter speeds, the sense of considered composition throughout his work is clear.





This shot was taken in Bali in 1956. It shows a ceremonial dance. What we love about this image is the pattern created by the arms of the men involved – it draws you into the picture and sweeps you around the frame.

Haas' reading of the situation is masterful. He obviously spotted the potential for creating a striking pattern with the group of men, then captured the proceedings from the perfect angle – not too low so that you can't see the circular shape, not so high that you begin to lose the energy of the diagonals in the bottom right of the picture.

Notice how the shot fills the frame, and how the bare patch of earth is slightly off-centre. Superbly executed.



Learn more from Ernst Haas' incredible work at www.ernsthaas.com.

Fill the frame

In photography, it's often said that if you can't make something good, make it big. By filling the frame with your subject there's no mistaking your centre of interest – although good compositional techniques, such as placing a key feature on a point of power, still apply. If you're finding it hard to get inspired by a scene, big, bold, confident framing is a great starting point to getting you fired up. Get in close – then get in closer still…



Make use of clothing and props to help your subject 'flesh out' the image. Leave a hint of background to give the impression that they're almost too big for the frame.

 **If you can't get in close, expand the presence of your subject in the frame using reflections or shadows. This family seem to fill the entire frame, but they only occupy half of it.**

Heads up

The most frequently shot frame-fillers are portraits. The power of eye-contact and dramatic close-up focus makes for some of the most arresting images. Simply pointing your lens at someone's face and pressing the shutter release doesn't guarantee a good result though. For a start, how much of the subject's face do you want to be sharply rendered? Everything? In which case, stop down the lens to a small aperture. Just the eyes? Go for a wide aperture – and make sure you nail the focus on the eyes.

Not all the best portraits show an even balance between the features of the sitter's face. Often you'll find that a much more ruthless crop in an image-editor gives a more dramatic result. Try positioning the image off to the side of the frame, with one eye on a point of power. Emphasise the texture of an old person's face by angled lighting and converting to a monochrome image during post production. Exaggerate features by using a wide-angle lens and getting in twice as close (although no-one will probably thank you for it).

Change perspective

Your choice of lens focal length plays a vital role in how you capture the world. Wideangle lenses (anything from around 28mm and below) exaggerate perspective, while telephoto lenses (100mm and above) compress it. Each has its own benefits and restrictions when it comes to composition.

A wideangle lens (or the wide end of a zoom) takes in a much bigger view of the world. It's relatively easy to get dramatic shots by tilting the lens up or down to take in more of an exciting sky or detailed foreground without shifting your position much. However, it becomes much harder to isolate interesting parts of the scene in front of you.

Telephoto lenses can help reduce the scene to the most important elements. Don't feel you need to take a picture from the same position as with the wideangle lens though…



Don't be afraid to move

One of the greatest aids to composition is a tripod. It slows your shooting speed down and makes you consider the scene in front of you with a little more care. But don't lock your camera on it until you've decided on the best angle to shoot from – it can be tempting to stay restricted to one spot.

Equally, don't simply be happiest with the first angle you choose. You don't necessarily have to move metres or miles – even shifting your camera a couple of inches can have a considerable effect. Think also about the height that you're shooting from. We're used to viewing the world from head height – by lowering or raising your viewpoint significantly – by getting down on your knees, lying on the ground or raising your tripod to its full height – you can create a greater sense of interest. Shots of children and animals benefit greatly if you get down to their eye level – it creates a much greater sense of intimacy. Is that the feeling you want in your final photo though?



The classic way to shoot a cityscape: in landscape format. The dominant element's been placed dead centre, it's a cluttered image and it's lost some of its impact as a result.

By changing shooting position, zooming in on the most significant part of the scene and using a portrait format to emphasise the height of the buildings, this is more vibrant.

Cut the clutter

Equally important as how you arrange the items within your frame, is what you've decided to leave out. Every element should strengthen and support your focal point – if it doesn't, be prepared to leave it out, either by moving your shooting position, changing lenses or returning to the scene later. Also, think about the quality of your subject matter – if you're shooting flowers, look for the cleanest, finest example – don't settle for ones that are missing petals or are surrounded by foliage which has been ravaged by insects. If you're photographing landscapes, watch out for brightly coloured cars or telegraph poles creeping into the edge of your shot – unless they're an essential part of your vision…





This picture has bags of impact. Strong diagonal lines, the building positioned off-centre and contrasting warm/cold light that emphasises the centre of interest. Shame about the sheep's rear peeping over the wall…

Sweep the frame

Before you press the shutter release, quickly scan around the viewfinder for distractions – anything that doesn't make your photograph stronger should be ruthlessly culled. Pay particular attention to out of focus highlights in a background – the sky showing through gaps in tree foliage is a classic example. Your viewers' eye will be drawn to these. Don't be afraid to try and mask these with your subject or shift your viewpoint to cut them out altogether.

Watch out for skies with no colour in them. A flat, greyed-out expanse can drain a picture of life. It's often better to not feature the sky at all at such times.

When taking pictures of people, animals or flowers, watch the position of the horizon – you don't want to decapitate your subject with a soft horizon line or change in tone. Be prepared to drop or raise the position of the camera and angle it up or down to isolate your subject against a softer, more uniform backdrop.

Consider the colours

Think about colours when you're framing your picture – does the colour of your main subject clash or compliment the background colour? Be aware that warm colours – oranges, reds, yellows – tend to leap out at the viewer, while cool ones – blues, greens – recede. You can use this relationship effectively by placing an area of bright colour on one of the rule of thirds' points of power, so strengthening your picture's impact.

This is also the case with warm and cold light – imagine a swan highlighted in the sun's early morning glow while the lake in the background remains in shadow, taking on a cold, blue tone.

Remember that smaller areas of bright tone will draw the viewer's attention away from a larger area of dark tones – is that where the strength lies in your final image?

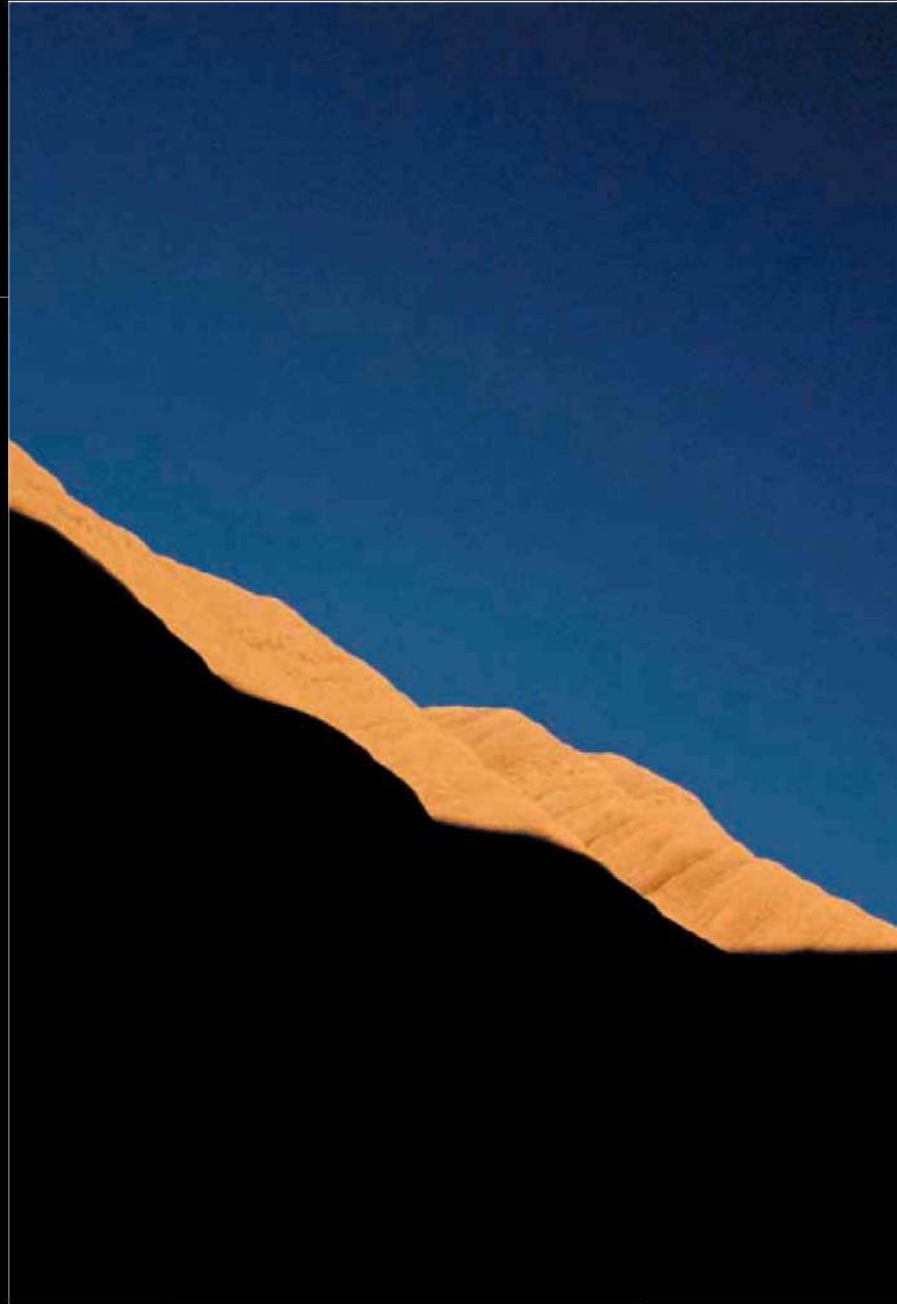
Master of composition

Art Wolfe

One of the world's biggest names in contemporary wildlife, nature and landscape photography, Art Wolfe is a master of composition and exposure.

In the 25 years his career's spanned so far, he's visited every continent and released more than 45 books of the images he's captured during his travels. He's already seen more than most of us will see in a lifetime.

What makes Art's images stand out from the crowd are his combination of dramatic metering and artistic designs. The son of commercial artists, many of his images display the eye of a painter in their compositions. No part of the frame goes to waste. When you're shooting more than 72,000 frames a year, that's important…




If ever a shot exemplified the 'simple is best' rule of composition, this is it. It's a shot of Australia's most famous natural wonder – Ayers Rock (Uluru). Or rather, it's a fragment of it.

There are only four elements to this photograph (if you include the sky), so they need to work in harmony with one another. Here, the exposure has become a central feature of the composition, with detail-free deep shadows used as a solid presence in the final image.

The addition of the moon at a point of power ties the image together – and ensures the black shadow doesn't dominate – but it's the highlighted section of rock contrasted against the deep blue sky that forms the focus of the photograph.


See more of Art's exquisite landscape photographs at www.artwolfe.com.

Create depth

To make the 2D plane of your photograph spring into life you'll need to create a convincing sense of depth. To do this you'll need to lead the viewer's eye into the picture by manipulating the foreground, middleground and background elements of a scene. A simple line leading through these areas of a picture to your centre of interest can be effective – picture a river snaking from the entire foreground to a tiny point on the horizon. Choice of lens and aperture are also vital components to creating depth.



A central subject given real visual power by the use of leading lines and careful cropping. Notice how there are no distracting elements.



When frames go bad? There's a convincing sense of depth here – but perhaps the arcing frame is too much of a distraction, being such a brightly lit, sharply defined area.

Choice of lens

As mentioned earlier, wide-angle lenses exaggerate perspective while telephoto lenses compress it. But with good technique, both can be used effectively to give a sense of depth.

If you've got a wide-angle lens mounted or you're shooting at the lower end of fixed zoom, look for something that'll help fill the foreground with interest, and provide a sense of scale – and don't be afraid to get in close.

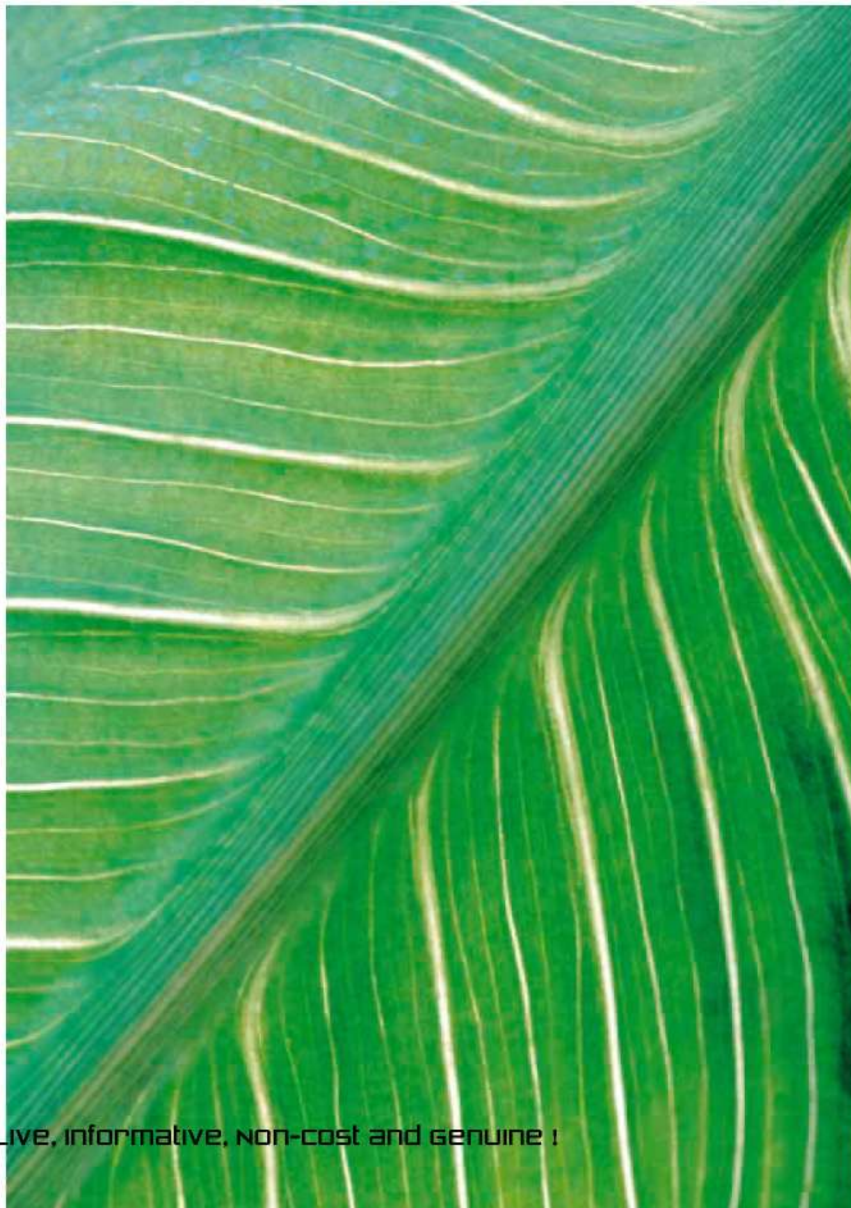
If you're working at the telephoto end, use the narrower perspective and limited depth of field to blur foreground and background detail, making a subject in the middle ground pop into focus. Get down to ground level when photographing animals, for instance, select a wide aperture and blur grasses in front of them to provide a soft frame. Combine this with an out-of-focus background which compliments the foreground (trees, bushes or taller grasses), and your in-focus subject will appear sharper than ever. Your photo will have a pleasing 3D effect.

Find a frame

One of the easiest ways to give your pictures depth is by finding a natural frame. By positioning your subject in the middleground of the photograph and finding a sharply rendered or blurred frame to occupy all or part of the foreground, you'll be able to draw viewers into your scene. Like all compositional laws, don't overuse framing – it'll become predictable.

Repetition & rhythm

Sometimes you don't want to isolate a single focus for your photograph – a group of subjects has created a pattern all its own, which in itself has become the centre of interest. Look for lines and shapes and repeated themes to create a sense of rhythm. Hunt out textures, and light that will reveal how it 'feels'. Think about placing contrasting patterns or textures next to each other – a sense of conflict always makes for a more exciting viewing experience. A collection of the most mundane objects can create surprisingly lively subject matter in the right hands…



The strong diagonals of a leaf study – classic or cliché? Be sure to angle the camera so that the sensor is parallel with the leaf's surface in order to maximise depth of field.



Strong lines and a great sense of texture make this image leap off the page. The only thing that's missing is a sense of scale – perhaps not important in a pure study of pattern and form.

Mind the gaps

To ensure your pattern has strength, make sure the photograph is balanced. It's good practice to make the subject fill the four corners of the frame – any spaces that aren't balanced by others will weaken the picture. You need to make it obvious to the viewer that the central focus of the photo is the pattern created by the collection of subjects, rather than the subjects themselves.

Be prepared to wait for the right moment as well. If you're attempting to capture a shot of a flock of birds, the strongest rhythms will be formed when they're all looking in the same direction. If you're trying to capture the ridges in a sand dune, wait until the light is low and angled from the side to reveal the texture they create.

If you're attempting to create a pattern from a raised perspective, it's wise to stop down the lens to a small aperture in order to get every element sharp, thereby emphasising 'the whole'. Why not try experimenting with slow shutter speeds to create swirling painterly patterns with moving objects? When attempting this technique, try and give your image an 'anchor' – a sharply rendered element that gives your viewers' eyes an entry and exit point into the photograph.

Master of composition

William Albert Allard

One of National Geographic's best known photographers, Bill Allard shot his first assignment for the magazine in 1964. Specialising in documenting people and vanishing cultures, his work is typified by a strong sense of composition, timing and reading of light. Shadows can form a central feature in his images, with silhouettes carrying added meaning and symbolic importance.

He's a great believer in breaking compositional rules when the need demands it, and refining the image down to its simplest elements to communicate the picture's message effectively.





A beautifully composed image loaded with symbolic meaning. It was shot in Glasgow, Montana and shows ranchers on horseback, as glimpsed through a broken wire fence. Does the state of the fence echo the state of ranching in present day Montana? Do the long shadows hint of an end to it as a career? Does it simply show the harsh existence of the ranchers, emphasised by the dust and harsh glare?

Compositionally, it shows Bill Allard thinking on his feet – with off-centre placement and exposure to bring out the shadows and make them a feature of the photograph. Note that the silhouettes don't merge with each other, and the central fence post adds power to the image by reaching from the top to the bottom of the frame.



See more of Bill's work at www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/allard/.

Active space

When you're attempting to capture a picture of a moving subject, you'll normally find your most successful shots come when you leave space in the frame for your subject to 'move into'. This area can be called 'active space', as it's where your subject's actively moving into. The space behind a moving subject is generally dead space – which is why many images tend to lose their dynamism if there's proportionally more of it. Even artistic motion-blurred shots work best when there's some room for your creation to escape into..





Where's your subject looking?

The idea of 'active space' can also be applied to stationary subjects and the direction in which they're looking. If your subject's on the right of the frame looking left, give them more space to look into on the left of the frame, and vice versa. But if you want to create a sense of mystery or place emphasis on your subject's environment, experiment with putting them closer to the edge of the frame they're looking towards.

Even the direction your subject is looking or moving towards can make a subtle difference to your picture's message. In Western cultures we're brought up to read from left to right, so we tend to view pictures the same way. Photographs where the movement is from left to right will feel as if they 'flow' more smoothly. If you want to provide a more arresting viewing experience, try capturing action moving from the right of the frame to the left.

Break from convention

Like all the other compositional 'laws', there are times when breaking the active space one produces a more interesting and effective picture.

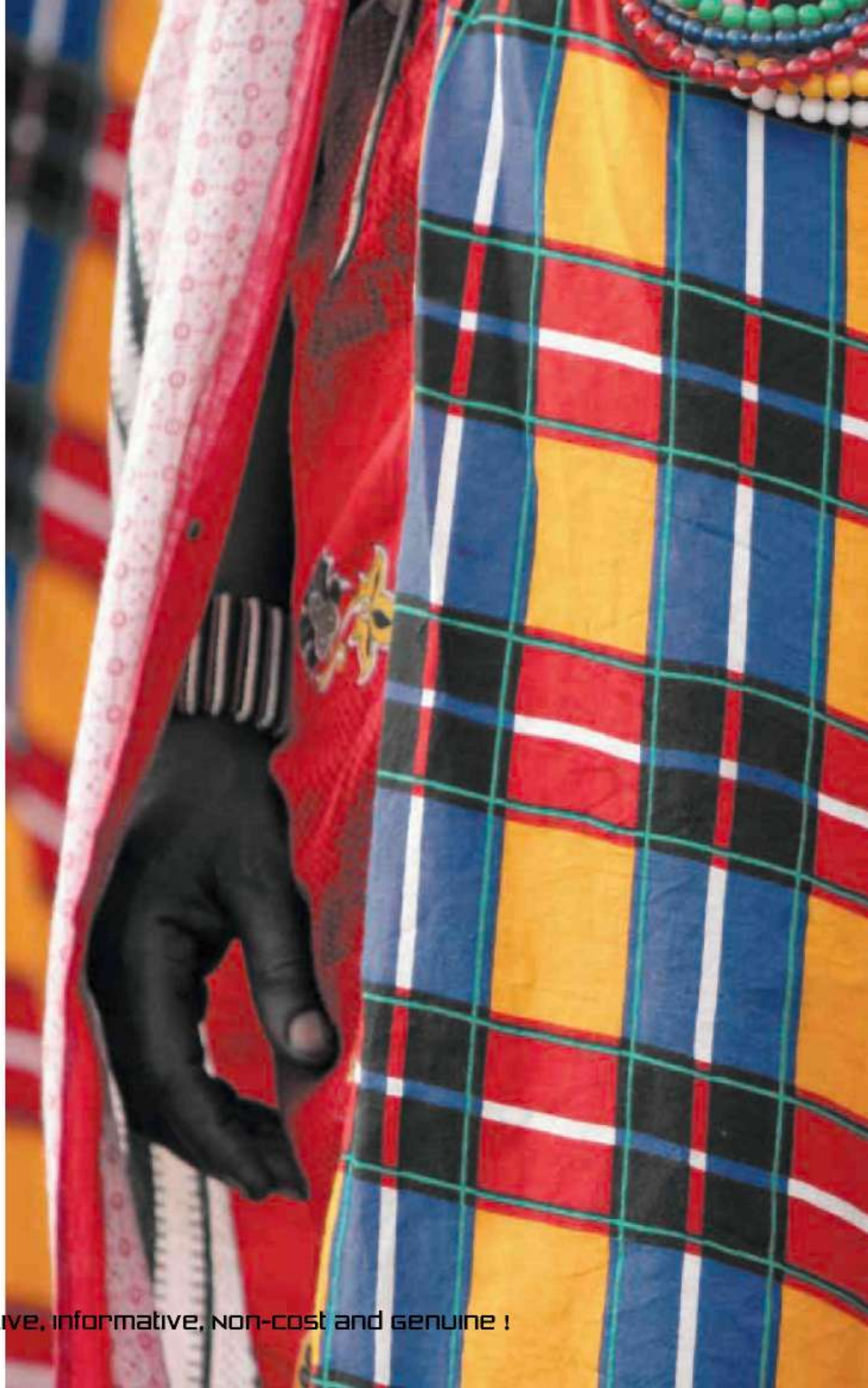
The classic time to steer clear of this rule is when you're attempting slow shutter speed pans combined with second curtain synch flash. This technique causes the blurred image recorded by the slow shutter speed to trail behind the sharp image captured by the burst of flash – and you obviously need more space for your image to 'trail' into.

Why second curtain synch flash? Selecting regular 'first curtain' synch means the flash fires when the shutter opens at the start of the exposure. While this gives you more control (you can frame your subject more easily) the trailing image moves across the frame in front of the sharp image. Compositionally, this is awkward – it gives the unnerving impression that your subject's moving backwards.



When a subject 'bleeds' out the rear of the frame in a slow-mo study, it's fine to leave only a small area for them to move into. Watch your background using this technique – find one that'll produce smooth tones when panned.

Even though the expanse between the girl and the edge of the frame she's looking out of is saturated with colour, there's still no mistaking the focal point – the diagonals draw you back there.

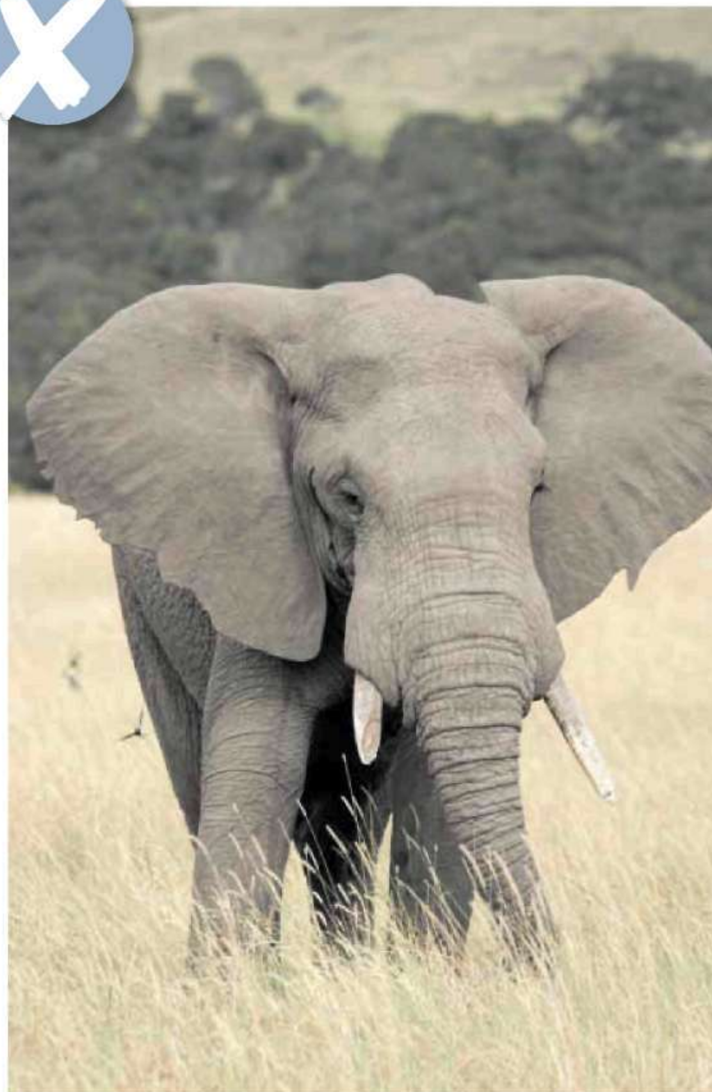




Cropping for impact



We've all been there – taken a pleasing shot, only to discover on closer scrutiny later that you've snipped off a part of your main subject, or an ugly piece of background's sneaked in on the edge of the frame. This is a particular problem with cameras that don't show the full frame in the viewfinder. In the days of film, the choice of mount for a transparency or selective enlargement of a negative could help crop out unwanted detail. The digital advantage brings faster, more creative cropping options. Just try not to treat post-production cropping as a crutch…



This is a 'nice' picture of an African elephant. Is 'nice' good enough? The tip of its left ear has fallen just out the frame and the out of focus bird is a little distracting.





By cropping in tighter, trimming equal amounts off each ear and reducing the amount of background, we've created a much more powerful image. Elephants are big – this emphasises it.

Get in tight

Watch out for close ups where parts of the subject are touching the edges of the frame or where there's only a very thin portion of background separating them – the image will end up feeling cramped. It's far better to crop for a tighter shot altogether. Deciding the amount of crop – how much before the image starts feeling too constrained – is something you'll need to judge by eye.

The same principle is true for photographs where you've accidentally clipped off a sliver of the subject – the end of an ear in a portrait for instance, or the edge of an arm in a three-quarter shot. Don't spend precious hours trying to rebuild it in Photoshop – or worse still, bin it – just go for a closer, more dynamic crop.





This is a reasonably well balanced image of a group of Masai women. Even though the focal point (the third figure from the left) is positioned more or less centrally, her angled face pulls you in.

Improving composition

As well as correcting for shooting errors, cropping on the computer also allows you to fine tune the composition to produce a more balanced image. While helping to cover up a mistake, you might find that one of your people shots actually benefits from a more concentrated focus on their face, or removing disproportionate amounts from the edges of a frame moves the centre of interest to a more dynamic location according to the rule of thirds. These are decisions you'll make based on your particular style of photography – you might be a rule breaker who wants to learn then ignore all the information in this book!

Ultimately, developing your post production cropping skills will help sharpen your in-camera framing – take time to experiment on one image to find out what crops please your eye the most. Then take that knowledge and experience out with you in the field and use it to crop in-camera, making use of every pixel on your sensor.





By cropping the image to reposition the focal point in a position closer to a point of power, the photograph becomes stronger. The emotion in the women's faces is more concentrated.

A shot of the Eiffel Tower from a dramatic perspective. The yellows of the subject lift it from the blue background. However, the graphic image is weakened by the off-centre placement.





Be bold

Once you're comfortable with trimming images to meet the familiar laws of composition, it's time to try experimenting with more abstract, shocking crops. Sometimes the most perfectly exposed, perfectly framed images of subjects that have a clear centre of interest sitting on a point of power can be incredibly… dull.

You might have taken a fantastic shot of a group of people, but cropping in on the tiniest detail – a couple holding hands, enemies exchanging a glance – can give your picture more meaning. Take a portrait and crop in closer than you have before. Rotate an image to create a dynamic diagonal, then crop it. Look at how you can isolate conflicting textures, colours, shapes or sizes with a tighter crop. Look for symbolic features. Break the rules. Want to put the horizon through the centre of the image? If that's what pleases you, do it. You'll only develop your own unique compositional style if you push the boundaries…







By introducing a minor crop, the subject is now placed centrally, meaning the image is well-balanced and much more effective as a graphic representation of a familiar landmark.



DigitalCamera magazine

Master Composition

Top 10 tips...

1 BACKGROUND, BACKGROUND, BACKGROUND, BACKG...
When framing a shot, pay as much attention to the background as you do your subject. A complimentary background can enhance a mundane subject – a poor choice of background will make a great subject fall flat.

2 KEEP IT SIMPLE
The strongest compositions are ones that get their message across quickly. Look for the building blocks of a great photograph in lines and shapes.

3 PERSONALISE IT
Ask yourself what you're drawn to in a scene – the height of a building, the patterns in a field, the shape of a flower – and bring that element out.

4 WATCH THE CROPPING
When you're framing people, avoid chopping them off at the knees or ankles.

5 THINK ABOUT NUMBERS
Odd numbers of things tend to be visually more exciting than even amounts. Triangles are more dynamic than squares or rectangles, which echo the boundaries of the frame. Three's the magic number…

6 RAISE YOUR ASPIRATIONS
Tell yourself that you're going to take the best photograph you've ever taken when you get up in the morning. This can lead to disappointment in the short term – in the long term, you'll definitely raise your game.

7 STUDY THE MASTERS
We've given you a taster of three masters of their craft in this book – take time to search out the cream of contemporary and classic photography (keep an eye on Digital Camera Magazine book reviews) and work out what it is about their composition that makes all the elements click into place.

8 AVOID CLICHÉS
Don't be happy with simply imitating other photos you've seen. Think about using different lenses, treatments and viewpoints. Don't be afraid to lie down in the mud or sand. Be determined to create something more artistic than you were producing a year ago.

9 SHOOT PLENTY OF FRAMES
Really work a subject – you're first shot is rarely your best one and you're not wasting film anymore. Work through early framing options to chisel your vision and weed out the duff ideas.

10 ALWAYS CARRY A CAMERA WITH YOU
The more you shoot – family, friends, daily life – the more you'll begin to refine your eye for composition. Then, when a once-in-a-lifetime situation presents itself, framing it quickly will be second nature.